

In Memoriam - Christopher Sibson
Address at the funeral service for Chris - 26 January 2010

Dear friends

It is above all with a sense of humility that I am going to say a few words about Chris today. Humility because for me, as I think for many of us, Chris was a colossus of a man. Not in the sense of the gigantic statue the Colossus of Rhodes, nor in the sense of a great conqueror or Emperor - but rather a colossus in his humanity. I think that all of us who worked with Chris, or were friends with him in various pursuits, or just knew him casually, feel privileged to have known this exceptional man.

Chris' early roots were in the north of England, and he always kept a special place in his heart for Cumbria and Northumberland. Indeed the photograph of Chris at the back of the church is of him gazing out over the North Tyne valley, which represented for him - in some ways - a kind of paradise on earth. The relegation last year of his beloved Newcastle United Football Club out of the Premier League was a bad blow for Chris, but one to which he gave a characteristically philosophical response.

Chris studied modern languages at Queen's College Oxford, and after a period as a school-teacher in London Chris worked in Geneva and in Holland, before coming to Luxembourg in the early 1970s. In Holland, Chris was one of the few British nationals to have been a staff member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. Chris' flair for languages and linguistic nuance not only equipped him for work, but contributed to his incredible ability to tell jokes. Chris would recount conversations between football-team managers such as Brian Clough and Alex Ferguson in regional dialects so strong you could hardly understand the words: and here in multi-cultural Luxembourg Chris - together with David and Robert - would have us rolling on the floor in laughter with accent-perfect accounts of encounters between friends and acquaintances of different nationalities. Chris had a dry sense of humour and a droll outlook on life, worthy of Monty Python always, and even slightly subversive at times. For many of us, this is the most enduring characteristic of Chris which we will retain in the years to come - and I think myself the one for which Chris himself would particularly like to be remembered.

Chris was a true European. He loved the European environment, and he loved living in Luxembourg. He was a wonderful example of how you can retain your affection for one place - in Chris' case, Newcastle-upon-

Tyne - and at the same time participate to the full in enjoyment of another - here in Luxembourg.

Chris' sense of humanity and concern for others must have been what brought him together with his wonderful wife Ruth many years ago. The past three decades have seen occasions too many to enumerate on which Chris and Ruth stepped forward to provide help to others. In their early days in Luxembourg, they provided shelter and a home to Chilean refugees from political violence; for the past thirty years they have been at the very foundation of the Anglican Church community in Luxembourg - which has seen some rocky times; they have been instrumental in assisting the Hope Romania charity - and there are many others. On the family front, Chris and Ruth have been loving parents, as David and Robert can testify. And Chris has been a dedicated godfather to his many god-children. To maintain contact with them, he used to send them postcards from all the places abroad that he visited - I would add that in our case he puts the other god-parents to shame.

Chris retired from the European Investment Bank six or seven years ago. I know he would want me to express in public his respect for the Bank as an institution, and his gratitude to it for providing so much support - particularly during his illness - but more generally for the opportunity that the Bank provided to engage with so many colleagues from different parts of Europe who share the same ideals and have the same integrity. One of the great loves of Chris's life was to walk and lunch with friends, and indeed the Thursday of every week in Chris' agenda in retirement was blocked out to do this with a group of fellow retirees from the Bank. How cruel was the illness to which Chris was subjected - in attacking precisely his ability to walk in the forest and to enjoy a modest lunch with his friends.

Chris' interests in life were as wide as his natural abilities were deep. His acute sense of sounds and intonation not only made him a natural linguist and teller of jokes, but also gave him a profound feeling for music. Apart from playing the Northumbrian pipes - which is rather an acquired taste, as some of you may have experienced - Chris was a passionate listener of music, in particular piano music. He was a great fan of Alfred Brendel. Oddly enough, Chris' musical talent did not extend to the dance-floor: a few years ago a group of us used to do training in ball-room dancing every Friday, until Chris declared that he was hanging up his boots and why didn't we just go to the pub for a beer instead. I think Chris would be proud to know that the tradition of the Friday evening drink continues in operation to this day.

Bird-watching. Chris' sensitivity to sounds probably also contributed to his knowledge of birds. At certain times of the year Chris could be seen at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning heading off with his binoculars to the lakes at Remerschen to observe the migration and nesting of certain species of bird. And if you were out in the fields walking with Chris he would be quite likely to announce that a skylark or a yellow-hammer could be heard overhead, quite unbeknownst to the rest of us.

Chris' interest in other countries made him a great traveller. He went all over the place while working for the Bank, and he made trips to South America and to Australia and New Zealand with his sons. We had planned to go to South Africa and the Caribbean to follow the England Test Match cricket team, and to take the mail-boat to St Helena in the South Atlantic before the airport is built there. But these plans were never to be fulfilled, overtaken by the illness which grounded Chris for the last two years of his life.

And so here we are today. Chris' life has been tragically cut short, before reaching his three score and ten years. His close friends can bear testimony to the incredible fortitude shown both by Chris and by Ruth throughout his cruel illness.

Let me conclude by quoting three of the many messages sent by friends over the past two days.

The first two from two of Chris' fellow-walkers:

"Chris possessed great humanity and thoughtfulness for others: an example for his friends who enjoyed sharing his wide interests and robust sense of humour", and secondly

"We have lost a man of exceptional ability and integrity. He was above all a genuinely nice human being and we must be grateful to have been one of his friends".

And thirdly, and finally, from a life-long friend and former fellow-student at Queen's College, Oxford, for which Chris retained a strong affection and where he maintained assiduously good contacts:

"If Chris were here to hear it, he would be having a quiet chuckle to himself at the end-of-term appraisal that his tutor at Queen's would have given him on his life's achievements - "Not bad, Sibson, not bad at all"".

I thank you.

Address given by Justin Loasby